

Crisis in Ukraine and the V4's Defence and Military Adaption

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INTRODUCTION

By annexing Crimea and fuelling violence in the Ukraine's easternmost regions, Russia seriously broke basic principles of international law and shook assumptions about cooperative character of post-Cold War security architecture in Europe. Yet, the seemingly compact Visegrad region has been strikingly disunited on whether these developments constitute a serious threat to their security and security of their allies, and what should be the response vis-à-vis Russia. Some countries of the region have split even at the national level, with their respective political representatives presenting differing or even antagonistic positions before home and foreign audiences.

Despite all that, the four countries were able to repeatedly support joint actions at the EU and NATO levels, including sector sanctions against Russia and military reassurance measures in the East. Moreover, they committed themselves to increase the defence budgets and boost capability development, and have already started to implement these plans. To understand the logic of these developments, one must not remain satisfied with a Russophobic Poland and a Russophile rest dichotomy.

THREAT PERCEPTION: GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

Geography plays its role in V4 countries' deliberations. For Poland, which shares a direct border with Russia, a combination of revisionist rhetoric, illegal military interventions, land grabs, subversion and espionage is a nightmare threat. Russian full-fledged invasion into Ukraine or advanced hybrid war with Poland or its NATO allies is considered unlikely, but cannot be excluded by the country's leadership as a potential scenario. Given its geographic location, historic experience, on-going aggression in its neighbourhood, and Russia's ability to undermine unity of the West, Poland's sensitiveness is not only understandable, but also justifiable.

Putin's rejection of the post-Cold War order and his desire to re-establish force as a standard policy tool is perceived as a threat not only by the political elite: In a 2015 PEW polling, 80% of Poles responded that Russia's revisionist approach is the largest threat to their country's security.¹ Moreover, Russia is perceived as a threat because it deteriorates the Poland's immediate security environment.

Foreign policy and security considerations of the other three Visegrad countries have been influenced by geography, as well. Slovakia and Hungary are the EU's and NATO's frontline states, having a direct border with Ukraine, but not with Russia. The Czech Republic is in an even more comfortable location, surrounded by friendly and stable NATO and EU

¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/19/anti-russian-views-on-the-rise-in-poland/>

member states. Their political leadership has therefore been more relaxed about the direct threat of Russian aggression.

Eventually, the three countries have also become distracted from a latent problem by an urgent one, stemming from the South. Especially for Hungary, mobilising its military reserves to re-establish control over its border – heavily penetrated by thousands of refugees from Syria and elsewhere – Russia is a non-issue at the moment.

Moreover, foreign policy issues are generally not discussed in Hungarian public space, unless they relate to internal politics. Therefore, neither the political elite (both from the Fidesz party and from the opposition), nor the media, are debating the crisis beyond the issue of difficult situation of Hungarian minority living in Ukraine. For Hungary, the primary security threat is migration connected to the emergence of the Islamic State and terrorism.

For the Czechs and Slovaks, their northern and southern Visegrad partners serve as buffer zones. Any Russian aggression deep into Central Europe would have to face a strong Polish resistance, taken that Ukraine is still a sovereign country. Similarly, while Hungary is facing a wave of migration from the south, the rest of the V4 is almost unaffected, besides the costs of political battles they fight within the EU over the quota system. Also, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are extremely divided internally, with their prime-ministers, foreign ministers and presidents often presenting their own contrasting versions of national foreign and security policies stemming from their susceptibility to economic interest groups or ideological preference for preconceived views over facts.

A good indication of the level of perceived urgency, and the influence of geography on the countries' threat perceptions, is the establishment of NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) in the eastern frontier states. While six of them were inaugurated in the fall of 2015 in the Baltic states, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania, there is still a hole in the fence right in the middle: Slovakia and Hungary have decided to establish the remaining two units on their territories as well, but the move was postponed until the first stage advanced. Their official motivations were in line with the above: Due to geography reasons, establishment of the NFIUs in countries having direct border with Russia was more urgent.

However, political reasons most probably influenced the delay, as can be seen by an absurd communication silence of the Slovak defence ministry both at the Wales summit (where we officially applied for the NFIU) and before and during the ministerial meeting in October 2015 (where the application was approved). Instead of explaining to the public the importance of the NFIUs for the security of the alliance and its member countries, even those very rare examples of communication (often limited to a press release) focused on the fact that it is not a NATO military base, but just a liaison team.

Despite the role of geography, other factors – such as internal politics, business ties, interest groups, information war, history and roots of public perceptions – need to be taken into account in explaining low level of securitization of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR: BORDERS AND NATO

Despite their disunity at the national and regional levels, the Visegrad countries agree that Russia violated international law and undermined its basic principles, especially the inviolability of borders which is strongly embedded not only in the Polish, but also in the Slovak

foreign policy tradition (Slovakia's Kosovo non-recognition being the most apparent example). Therefore, there has been some reevaluation of the security environment, as evidenced at the NATO Wales summit by the V4's support to the Readiness Action Plan.

The Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia respond through this multilateral framework, because they see Russia as an indirect threat: NATO security guarantee – which is a key pillar of their security – would cease to exist if even one of its member states would find itself alone vis-à-vis Russian aggression. Enhancements of NATO's ability to defend its own territory – and expressions of solidarity – are seen as necessary by all of them.

In Hungary, southern vector could have a similar impact on the national security thinking as the eastern vector has on the Polish one. After all, it was the slow construction of the border fence, and ineffective deployment of the army – not the slow implementation of the Readiness Action Plan – that led to the resignation of Hungarian defence minister Csaba Hende in September 2015.

RETHINKING MILITARY PRIORITIES

What the Visegrad countries have in common is the return in their strategic thinking from expeditionary operations to territorial defence. This started well before the Ukraine crisis with the approaching end of the ISAF mission. In Poland, the shift initiated by President Komorowski started with an announcement of a massive military modernisation programme. Russian actions in Ukraine speeded up that process, motivated preparations for countering the Russian tactic of hybrid-war, as well as shaped the enforcements of regular forces, their more appropriate dislocation (especially in the eastern flank of the country) and the reform of the army's reserves. On the international level, Poland called for collective response of NATO, permanent NATO troops stationing in the territories of the alliance's eastern flank, more live exercises focusing on Article 5 scenarios, and improvement of national military capacities of the member states.

Similarly, in response to the crisis in Ukraine, the Czech defence ministry started to emphasise more the importance of heavy arms, such as tanks or artillery, air-defence (including mobile radar systems), and helicopters. After years of "afghanisation" of the military – during which the country neglected crucial capabilities needed for territorial defence – the new security environment highlighted the necessity to eliminate those deficiencies, known well before the crisis in Ukraine – as it was reflected in White Book on Defence published in 2011.

While for the Poles, the first line of territorial defence relates mainly to their own territory, the rest of the V4 might first need to contribute to the collective defence outside their own borders (presumably in the Baltic countries and Poland). This also means stocking up on ammunition, streamlining national decision-making procedures related to deploying troops abroad (and receiving allied military assistance at home), recruiting much more professional soldiers to be able to fill up the planned structure of the military, building more robust reserves, increasing the frequency and volume of both national and multinational exercises focusing on Article 5 situations, and dusting off mobilisation plans and crisis management mechanisms.

Despite the general understanding of what needs to be done in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, there is still a long way to go in terms of deep rethinking of the force structure and planning processes. Moreover, the massive modernisation is often reducing old deficits in capability development. A good example is Slovakia, where enormous deficiencies

have accumulated during the last two decades: While it is preparing its forces for the EU Battlegroup or NRF deployments, it has serious problems with its own territorial defence.

Also, most of the Slovak strategic documents are outdated: The current security strategy was adopted in 2005 and is not going to be changed before late 2016 or early 2017; the country's defence strategy is of the same age. Therefore, any action taken by the Slovak government should be seen as an ad-hoc reaction, rather than a part of a strategic adaptation. This is in strong contrast with the Czech Republic and Poland, where security strategies have been quickly updated to correspond with the new security environment (even the Czech one explicitly lists aggressive revisionist powers as a security threat).

The Polish security strategy puts more emphasis on traditional threats and challenges, it states that local and regional threats exist in Poland's neighbourhood that may impact country's security (directly or indirectly), and recognizes that Poland is not free from forms of political pressure, which can include military arguments. It also highlights possible escalation of Russia's confrontational policy, and a need to strengthen national defence capabilities.

For Hungary, the territorial defence became an absolute priority in the last couple of months due to the migration crisis, but the country is mainly reacting with ad-hoc measures limited to the protection of borders at the moment, having no personal capacities to look into strategies and other related documents. With regards to the crisis in Ukraine, Hungarian contingency planning has rather civilian nature, focusing mainly on the possibility of an inflow of ethnic Hungarians as refugees.

SAVING THE BUDGET

The changed approach to security can be best evidenced on the decisions related to the defence spending. In line with the pledges given at the NATO Wales summit, the Visegrad countries have reversed the negative trend and started to raise their defence budgets:

Following the defence investment pledge from Newport, in July 2015 the Polish parliament approved the law that raises the bar of defence expenditures up to 2% of GDP, and guarantees no less than 20% of defence budget for modernisation (with 20% of modernisation budget envisaged for air and missile defence). Poland actually raised its 2015 defence budget by 18%, achieving the highest annual increase in Europe. There is also quite healthy share of modernization expenditures (exceeding 25%) in the overall defence budget. It allows for an ambitious multi-year program of Armed Forces development. Importantly, the budget increase is enjoying strong public support and is not contested by the opposition.

The three other V4 countries spend significantly less than Poland, but some of them managed to increase on a year-to-year basis: Slovakia – planning to augment the defence budget to 1.6% of the GDP by 2020 – started this year with an annual increase 0.1% of the GDP to roughly 1.1% of the GDP, most likely thanks to acquisitions, especially of the Black Hawk helicopters. Hungary's pledge to get its defence expenditures to 1.4% of the GDP by 2022 started to be implemented in 2015 when the amount grew by 8%, a pace which the government wants to keep for 2016. The Czech Republic's defence budget stagnated, but the government plans to achieve a sharp 9% growth next year, in an attempt to fulfil its promise to reach 1.4%

of the GDP by 2020. The Wales commitment was even incorporated into the revised Security Strategy of the Czech Republic, this year².

The overall trend gives good reasons for optimism, but one should be aware of hitches as well. In Slovakia, the key question is sustainability of the budget increase, as it lacks long-term planning of modernisation. There is no public debate on what needs to be acquired in 5-10 year period and what resources need to be allocated (partially due to zero modernization in the past two decades and the fact, that basically everything needs to be replaced immediately). There is not even an information on the exact amount of 2015 acquisition expenses available to the public.

In Hungary, increase of personal costs ate-up all surplus money in 2015 and are going to cut from the planned 8% increase in 2016, as well. Although the salary increases were inevitable if the massive human capacity outflow from the armed forces was to halt, it actually prevented any modernisation to happen. The rare exceptions will be the development of runways at the Papa air base in a way it can be better used for NATO's strategic airlift. Also, the defence ministry claims it would not be able to handle faster growth, not a good signal about its human capacities, taken into account there was almost none modernisation this year.

ACCELERATING MODERNISATION

Even though the massive modernisation programme of Poland was announced before the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, the new situation invoked some changes to the original plan. A quick review of main modernisation programs confirmed that the main priorities – reinforcement of air and missile defence capability, surveillance and reconnaissance capability, as well as mobility of forces – had been rightly identified. However, it was decided to adjust operational requirements and speed up delivery timelines with regard to some programs.

For instance, new attack helicopters – originally expected to replace the aging fleet of Mi-24 in the next decade – have now become priority. Tender on multipurpose helicopters is close to finalisation, the process of acquisition of the air-to-ground stealth cruise missiles (JASSM) and the related modernisation of the Polish F-16 fleet has also been accelerated. Poland put an effort in speeding-up acquisitions of long range reconnaissance, medium range MD-capable air defence systems (although the negotiations on Patriot system with Raytheon are still not finished), and it is expected that an additional batch of anti-tank guided missiles will be ordered.

Besides the timeline adjustments, it was decided that some additional capabilities are to be acquired, including the Polish Maritime Command (POLMARFOR) to support joint operations in the Baltic region, reinforcement of the Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC NE) in Szczecin, extension of the programme of exercises (mostly focusing on Art. 5 scenarios), establishment of the Cyber Operations Centre, as well as establishment of Counter Intelligence Centre of Excellence (CI COE), in cooperation with Slovakia.

Slovak modernisation, followed by – rather than preceded by – allocation of money, has reached unprecedented levels in the last twelve months: The country acquired hundreds of personal weapons from Ceska zbrojovka, two Spartan aircrafts, nine Black Hawk helicopters, dozens of transport vehicles, it announced planned acquisition of Polish Rosomak 8x8 armoured vehicles, it launched a tender for 3D radars, and opened negotiations with Saab over

² Czech Security Strategy 2015, see para 93, http://www.mzv.cz/file/1483514/Security_Strategy_CZ_2015.pdf

a possible lease of its Gripen aircraft. On the other hand, the financial plan of modernisation is missing and it is only to be seen how the next government will deal with the modernisation's costs, some projects have been only announced without actually signing contracts, and the willingness to do so before elections has been questioned (as is the example of the supersonics).

Even though the changed security environment might contributed to Slovak modernisation revival, it is reasonable to expect that two practical motivations were more influential: First, heavy underdevelopment in the past 25 years resulting in an alarming state of basically every type of major weapon system and equipment (being permanently a source of institutional pressure from NATO); Second, indirect result of the Russian aggression in the form of arms embargo imposed by the European Union, shortening the life expectancy of air force's weapons and equipment, such as of fighter jets, helicopters, radar systems and missile defence. These emergency conditions further limited an already insufficient planning of acquisitions, as well as contributed to the already poor level of transparency and public debate about the government's strategic decisions.

While Poland and Slovakia (surprisingly, taken into account the ages-long capability development sleep) are in a process of large-scale modernization, Hungary postponed basically any modernisation due to financial reasons (increasing personnel costs) and insufficient human capacities (massive deployment of armed forces to protect state borders in a response to the migration crisis). The most urgent capability shortfall is the country's rotary wing being on life support only thanks to a quick buy of three Mi-8 helicopters days before the EU's arms embargo came into effect. It is fair to say that some money have been invested in the modernisation related to the preparation of the Visegrad EU battlegroup, such as new close air support improvements of country's Gripen fleet and the above mentioned upgrade of the Papa air base scheduled for 2016 in the amount of 70 million EUR³. Also, they already have their contract with Saab what reduces the modernisation pressure in supersonics.

The core tenets of the Czech Army modernization may be referred to the White Book of Defence adopted in 2011 fully reflecting NATO Strategic Concept of 2010 and preceding Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The main framework document concerning army modernization envisaged by the White Book – The Concept of the Czech Army Development – has been recently finalized and is to be approved by the Czech government in October 2015. The extra money for defence will be used to recruit more soldiers (including newly developed system of “active reserve troops”), to procure sufficient amount of materiel (including stocking up on ammo while acquisition being made through European Defense Agency a NATO Support Agency), and will allow for conducting more frequent and more robust exercises and acquiring major equipment. More specifically the Czech Army intends to acquire two additional CASA transport planes, multipurpose helicopters, 20 more “Pandur” armoured vehicles, 10 new 3D-mobile radars, artillery, etc.

GOING BEYOND THE READINESS ACTION PLAN

The Wales summit launched an important upgrade of the alliance's collective defence capacity. The Readiness Action Plan is seen as an appropriate, adequate, rational and measured response to Russia's aggression which is now being implemented without significant delays or deficiencies under the leadership of Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

³ Defence Budget of Hungary for 2016: <http://www.parlament.hu/irom40/04730/adatok/fejezetek/13.pdf>

An important contribution of the Visegrad countries to NATO's adaptation is a substantial increase of military exercises. Just to name few examples: Slovakia has organized the final stage of an exercise entitled Slovak Shield in September 2015 with a participation of Czech, Polish, Hungarian and US soldiers, totalling more than 4,000 troops. Hungary put together a massive "Brave Warrior" exercise with a significant US presence, including tanks and armoured vehicles, and parts of the US equipment is to be stationed in Hungary for some time. Budapest also organized an air force exercise including a C-17 Globemaster III and two C-130 Hercules aircrafts this year at its NATO airbase in Papa. One of the key motivations for Hungary in organizing these manoeuvres is the improvement of damaged bilateral relations with the US (a new Hungarian military presence in Iraq also supports this argument). Finally, the whole Visegrad group will cooperate on a large-scale exercise in Poland in the fall of 2015, featuring the first Visegrad EU battlegroup.

Besides the exercises, there are differences between the countries in their ability to contribute to the reassurance measures. Slovakia, investing a lot in acquisitions, is not providing substantial land force, it is lagging behind in setting-up the NFIU (together with Hungary), it cannot contribute to the Baltic air patrols due to technical reasons, and it has not yet adapted its legislation to high demands on the speed of decision-making in crisis situations. In general, though, the speed of implementation of the Readiness Action Plan is perceived as satisfactory. However, the RAP was only an important first step in the adaptation process and a deeper adaptation of the Alliance to deteriorated strategic environment (both in the East and South) is needed. The Warsaw summit should therefore complement the ongoing reassurance with bold deterrence measures following the new Political Guidance and the forthcoming military assessment being prepared by NATO.

The election of President Duda in Poland, whose first visit was to Estonia, and who has spearheaded with Romania a "frontline allies" heads of state summit in Bucharest in early November 2015, has been a cause for concern in the rest of the region. Duda's desire to "re-regionalize" Polish security policy, by fostering a rapprochement with the Baltic States, Bulgaria and Romania, seems to be aimed at building a group of like-minded Allies that can weigh as a block in pre-Summit discussions, in order to achieve a strong measure of the Warsaw Strategic Adaptation Initiative (or Newport Plus).

Poland – as a leader of the deterrence debate – wants to push through the creation of a permanent NATO military base on the Polish territory. According to the Polish view, NATO also needs to create appropriate follow-on forces to complement the enhanced NRF, distribute its force structure more evenly across the allied territory, assign appropriate role to the Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin and institutionalize the Framework Nations Concept.

The rest of the V4 cannot afford to be kept out of the "Bucharest" format and will have to find an acceptable middle ground, which will be even more challenging if Duda is emboldened by a decisive win of his PiS party in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Thus, V4's unity could be under threat if Duda's regional ambitions push the NATO agenda further away from what the middle road that is deemed acceptable in the rest of the Group.

WISEGRAD COOPERATION: NO CHANGE OF PRIORITIES

The differences among the V4 countries when it comes to the perception of the Russian threat, have weakened the position of the Group as a security actor (especially since Poland's elites lost their hopes that the V4 may be a useful tool of deterrence of Russia's influences in the EU). However, they have not affected cooperation practice: It is strongly institutionalized, with senior officials and political representatives having regular (and also irregular) meetings. In 2014, they approved a long term program of the Visegrad defence cooperation, followed by an implementation plan a year later.

Also, the V4's flagship project, the Visegrad EU battlegroup, has been a strong vehicle of cooperation. As it will be on stand-by in the first half of 2016, the Visegrad countries have been doing all necessary preparations – including joint military exercises, coordinated defence procurement and joint defence development – to make sure it is combat-ready. Furthermore, the Czech V4 Presidency aims at transforming this battlegroup into a permanent modular force of the Visegrad Group – in line with the DAV4 Expert Group recommendations⁴ and the 2014 Budapest Declaration⁵. DAV4 Expert Group is a Visegrad-level advisory group consisting of think-tankers and senior officials. The findings of the group traditionally proved to be the driving force of defence cooperation in the region.

There has also been some progress in preparations of the joint air-policing (bilateral Czech-Slovak debate is even in an advanced stage), and bilateral projects has advanced in arms sales and military production (for example, joint development and acquisition of the Rosomak Scipio armoured carriers with Slovakia has been announced).

As a previous DAV4 report recommended⁶ in 2012, regional cooperation has become a serious option in capability development: Some attempts have succeeded (such as the Rosomak Scipio project, or the acquisitions of Czech personal weapons by Slovakia), others have failed (such as the tender for 3D radars), and some are still on the table (such as Slovakia's possible lease of the Gripen aircraft). The good news is that major international projects are consulted in the region and the cooperation option is evaluated.

On the other hand, the Visegrad format has not been able to provide joint answers for the Russian threat and the priorities of the Group therefore remain largely unchanged: It does not play more important role within NATO, nor it adopts its own measures in the field of territorial defence.

One of the priorities of the Czech V4 presidency is linking of the regional defence cooperation more tightly with developments on the NATO and EU levels so that the four countries are able to collectively contribute to their adaptation. This effort should not be limited to practical issues, such as possible regional contributions to the NATO Response Force (NRF), the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and/or follow-on forces, but should also encompass a strategic debate on the new version of the NATO Strategic Concept, as well as the EU Global Strategy for foreign and security policy, to be submitted by High Representative Federica Mogherini in June 2016.

The old European Security Strategy was written in an era of relative security and prosperity, its main concerns were terrorism and the non-state actors, possibly controlling the

⁴ DAV4 II Report: From battlegroup to permanent structures, <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/dav4-ii-report-battlegroup-permanent-structures>

⁵ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/budapest-declaration-of>

⁶ <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/dav4-full-report-towards-deeper-visegrad-defence-partnership>

weapons of mass destruction. It focused on peaceful stabilisation of the European neighbourhood through civilian measures and the transformation of Central Europe served as a role model for the European Neighbourhood Policy. Europe now needs to rethink its strategy and adapt to a new, much dangerous security environment, and the Visegrad Group needs to find a common position on that.

Similarly, NATO needs a new Strategic Concept to reflect what happened to the east of its borders. It must be able to deter any attack against any member state by making sure a potential aggressor does not know whether it is Estonian, British or American soldier on the other side of the border. The Visegrad countries should work together so that the leaders will agree at the Warsaw summit that a new document is to be prepared.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Visegrad cooperation offers a potential that can both expand the pool of available capabilities and increase the visibility and strength of this region within multilateral organizations. To make that happen, the V4 countries should consider the following recommendations:

- Continue in the tradition of joint declarations to foster visibility of the Group and its internal strengthening. The best opportunity for joint declaration at the level of prime-ministers will be the Warsaw summit. A similar declaration on a ministerial level supporting the development of CSDP is a tradition since 2012, and would be essential prior to the Summit.
- Continue increasing defence budgets according to their pledge from Warsaw, as well as invest these money in capability development projects. Be more transparent about defence expenditures, such as through releasing data assembled by NATO (as other countries did).
- Educate the political elites and improve their communication with experts in think-tanks and military. V4 leaders need to engage in regular security dialogue to bridge threat perception gaps and to uphold domestic security policy debate to strategic level.
- Take propaganda (both Islamist and Russian) more seriously, especially as the later one has become effective in shaping Czech, Hungarian and Slovak public discourse.
- Make the V4 EU Battle Group a basis of multinational rapid reaction force (V4 Modular Force), also by creating permanent defense coordination mechanism for defense planning and rapid reaction force generation.
- Expand practical cooperation with regard to the development and acquisition of specific capabilities. Jointly enhance of specific capabilities for NATO, such as in CBRN, Joint Terminal Attack Controllers, logistic support, and training of Special Operations Forces.
- Agree on joint V4 contribution to NATO initiatives concerning longer-term adaptation, such as the VJTF, NFIUs, the Multinational Corps Northeast, other NATO infrastructure.
- Implement the V4 Training & Exercises Strategy, including regular V4 high visibility exercises focused on Article 5.
- Cooperate on shaping the text of the EU global strategy on foreign and security policy (EGS) so that it offers a sound situational awareness about current and emerging threats, sense of priority, and clarity about existing crisis-management tool, and ways it should be developed.

- It would make sense to coordinate positions on the EGS among the Visegrad countries. This process should be promoted by the expert community in the form of a Visegrad position paper.

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